

The Underground Life of a New Zealand Labour Historian: Bert Roth and the Austrian Socialist Underground

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Interviewed by a newspaper late in his life Bert Roth, the doyen of New Zealand labour history, described himself as a “modest Champagne socialist”. The “modest Champagne” reference was both a subtle acknowledgment of his comfortable material circumstance and also a tongue in cheek comment on the tendency to disparage the current leadership of the New Zealand Labour Party with the label “Chardonnay Socialists”. His self description as a socialist is perhaps most interesting, it represented a strong continuity in Roth’s political thinking. He arrived in New Zealand in April 1940 and from the very first day identified himself as a socialist. When approached by a reporter from the *Evening Post*, he described himself as a “socialist refugee from Austria”.

Roth became active in the left while living in Wellington and later in Auckland. He was he was never much of a ‘party man’, preferring to stay one step removed from particular ideological groupings. This degree of distance marked a contrast to his pre New Zealand years. While most people knew Bert was a refugee from fascism, his strong accent was a reminder of this, few knew about his very active role in the Austrian socialist movement. This paper will explore this little known aspect of the life of Bert Roth.

Roth became a socialist in 1934 while still at school and ultimately played a key role in the youth section of the underground resistance to fascism in Austria. He was the national leader of the Red Falcons, an underground socialist youth organisation. He was also active in the Red Students League and the Young Communist League, of which he was a member of the national executive. The paper will provide an account of his activity in these organisations, drawing extensively on Roth’s own memoirs from the time. The paper will also conclude with a brief assessment of the influence of Roth’s socialist politics on his labour history.